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## Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Street Children in Romania: Catalysts of Vulnerability and Challenges in Recovery

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# The BOSTON INITIATIVE To ADVANCE HUMAN RIGHTS

Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Street Children in Romania: Catalysts of  
Vulnerability and Challenges in Recovery

Meredith Gamble

The Boston Initiative to Advance Human Rights

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**Acronyms**

**ANITP:** Agentia Nationala Impotriva Traficului de Persoane/National Agency Against Trafficking in Persons

**BITAHR:** The Boston Initiative to Advance Human Rights

**DGASPC:** Directia Generala de Asistenta Sociala si Protectia Copilului/The General Directory for Social Assistance and Child Protection

**MPHASIS:** Mutual Prograss on Homelessness through Advancing and Strengthening Information Systems

**NGO:** Non-governmental organization

**SCOP:** Societatea pentru Parinti si Copii

**UN:** United Nations

**UNICEF:** United Nations Children's Fund

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## I. Definition of Terms

**Identification:** This term will be used to describe documents that prove a person is registered and belongs to a state. This includes birth certificates, national identification cards, passports, or other documents that establish the nationality of a person.

**Roma:** An official definition of the term Roma has yet to be resolved<sup>1</sup>. The Roma are considered an ethnic minority in Romania with historical origins in India. For the purposes of this study, Roma persons shall be considered individuals who identify themselves as Roma, *or* have been born to Roma parents *or* who speak Romany or other related dialects.

**Street Children:** Per the most commonly used definition, and the definition accepted by the United Nations, street children shall be understood as “any boy or girl ... for whom the street in the widest sense of the word ... has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults (Panter-Brick, 2002). The use of the term street children throughout this report shall mean only children who are living permanently on the street, not those children who may work on the street during the day, and return to their families at night.

**Trafficking:** Pursuant to the United Nations definition (2000), “trafficking in persons shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.” It is important to note that while movement across state or national borders may be an element of trafficking in persons, trafficking can occur without any movement of a victim.

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion on this issue, see Ladanyi, Janos and Ivan Szelenyi. (2001). The social construction of Roma ethnicity in Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary during market transition. *Review of Sociology*, 7.2, 79-89. Retrieved from <http://www.akademai.com/content/v262584626015v13/>

## II. Abstract

An estimated 1,500-3,000 children live on the streets of Romania (UNICEF, 2006; MPHASIS, 2008). Without the basic necessities to survive, a healthy family structure, proper identification, and an education, these children are at a high risk for sexual exploitation. This study examines what factors in the lives of street children contribute to their vulnerability to sexual exploitation and trafficking as well as the effectiveness of existent social services available to street children. Several characteristics in the lives of street children, including poverty and desperation for basic needs, broken family structures, drug use, lack of education, race, and lack of supervision and documentation all contribute to heightened vulnerability to sexual exploitation and abuse. The effects of sexual abuse and exploitation are extremely damaging both physically and emotionally, and limited human and financial resources are available in Romania to comprehensively address this issue and rehabilitate the victims. This study was conducted through interviews and focus groups with experts working at organizations serving street children and trafficking victims as well as with officials working in the national anti-human trafficking department in Bucharest, Timisoara, and Arad.

## III. Sex Trafficking in Romania

Romania is a country of origin, transit, and destination for victims of sex trafficking (US Trafficking in Persons Report, 2009). Since its inception in August 2005<sup>2</sup>, the national anti-trafficking authority in Romania, *Agencia Națională Împotriva Traficului de Persoane* (ANITP), has reported 8,636 cases of human trafficking, 4,641 of those cases for the purpose of sexual exploitation (ANITP, 2007; ANITP 2009a). In the year 2009, ANITP reported 780 cases of trafficking, 320 of which were sex trafficking (ANITP, 2009b). Since 2005, the reported number of sex trafficking cases has maintained a steady decline with 1760 sex trafficking cases in 2005, 1450 in 2006, 724 in 2007, 386 in 2008 and 320 in 2009 (See Figure 1) (ANITP 2009b, ANITP 2007).

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<sup>2</sup> Created under Government Decision no. 1584 of 08.12 2005 (Ionescu, 2009).

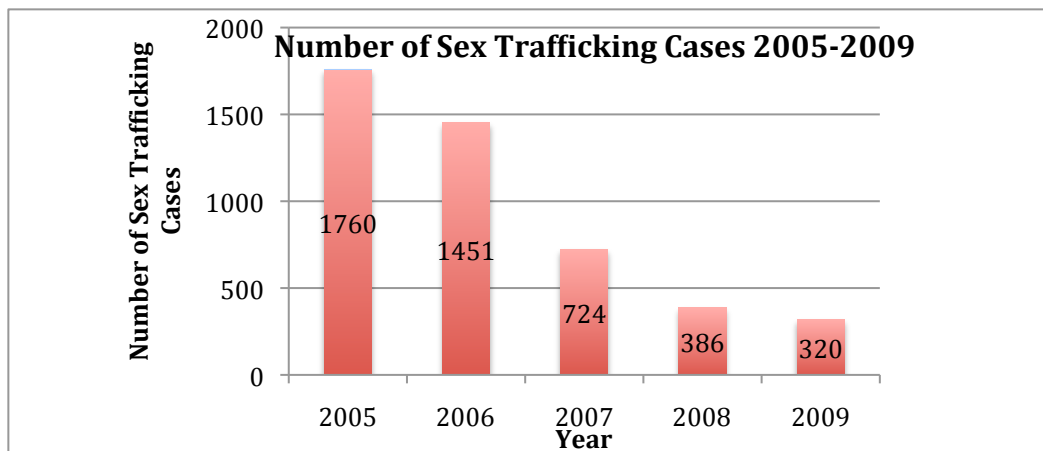


Figure 1: Number of Sex Trafficking Cases 2005-2009 (ANITP 2009b, ANITP 2007)

The most prevalent form of human trafficking in 2009 was sex trafficking, comprising 41% of all trafficking victims (ANITP, 2009b). All victims were women and 176 (29%) victims were minors (ANITP, 2009b). Victims of sex trafficking were most frequently trafficked to Romania (111 cases), Italy (77 cases), Spain (59 cases) and Holland (14 cases) (ANITP, 2009b).

### 3.1. Child Victims of Sex Trafficking

Research statistics compiled in 2007 show that child victims of trafficking are overwhelmingly used for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Of all minor trafficking victims in 2007, 75% were trafficked for this purpose. Child victims of sex trafficking are equally at risk to internal and external trafficking, although sex trafficking is the most frequent form of trafficking in Romania. From a total of 221 cases of child sex trafficking in 2007, 116 minors were trafficked internally, and 105 were trafficked externally (ANITP, 2007).

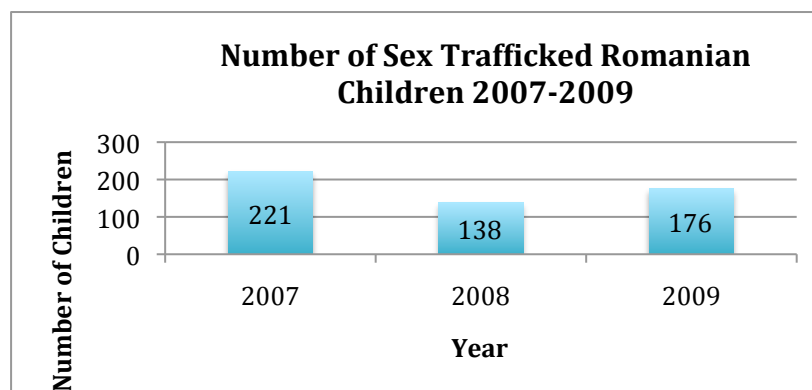


Figure 2: Number of Sex Trafficked Romanian Children 2007-2009 (ANITP, 2007; ANITP2009b)



Minors between 14-17 years old are at the most at risk to sex trafficking; of all child victims of sex trafficking in 2008, 94% were within this age bracket (ANITP, 2009c). Child victims of sex trafficking were most frequently externally trafficked to Italy (70 victims), Spain (22 victims), and Holland (7 victims) (ANITP, 2007). In 2008, ANITP reported 138 cases of child sex trafficking, with 76 victims trafficked internally and 62 trafficked abroad (ANITP, 2009c). In both 2007 and 2008, approximately 50% of all sex trafficked children were trafficked within Romania's borders (ANITP, 2009c). Child sex trafficking is the most prevalent mode of exploitation both externally (70% of all child victims) and internally (91% of all child victims) (ANITP, 2009b).

### **3.2. Factors of Vulnerability**

A 2009 ANITP study on the recruitment of children for trafficking identified the following as factors of vulnerability to trafficking:

- Family poverty
- Family unemployment
- Lack of family involvement in children's lives
- Unstable family situation (including neglect, abuse, conflict, and domestic violence)
- Rural isolation and lack of opportunities
- Children living in institutions, boarding schools, or with relatives or neighbors
- Lack of education (paired with low income levels, poverty, and illiteracy)
- Inadequate social services (especially in rural areas)

Of these factors, respondents in the study<sup>3</sup> largely agreed that economic and familial factors have the most influential roles in vulnerability to trafficking (91% and 92%, respectively) (ANITP, 2009c).

#### **3.2.1 Economic Conditions**

Economic conditions, including unemployment and poverty cause children to be susceptible to trafficking. The lure of finding a more prosperous future makes impoverished children, as well as their families, more vulnerable to the false promises proposed by recruiters. (ANITP, 2009c). Financial desperation also

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<sup>3</sup> Including trafficking experts, psychologists, researchers, NGOs, mass media, the church, and members of government agencies for trafficking (ANITP), child protection (DGASPC), organized crime and terrorism (DIICOT), labor inspection, education, public health, police, social assistance and probation. Responses were fielded through focus groups and questionnaires.

leads some families to knowingly give up their children into the hands of traffickers, naively believing that their children will have a better chance of a successful life, or believing that their child will bring financial stability to the family (ANITP, 2009c). Children, and particularly adolescents, from economically unstable homes are also less likely than their middle class or wealthier peers to have appropriate skepticism of recruiters who may shower them with expensive gifts and fancy dinners (ANITP, 2009c).

Closely related to the impact of a family's economic situation is level of education, rural living, and access to social services. Children from poor families in rural villages have limited access to education and financial opportunity. Attending school may mean living away from home for the majority of the year, or commuting hours everyday. Agriculture and farming is the primary form of income in rural Romania, and many children and their families may be unwilling or financially unable to send their children to school. Therefore, some rural children may be required to contribute to the family income by farming instead of attending school. Without education, these children will not gain the skills and knowledge to pursue employment outside of farming, essentially perpetuating the poverty cycle and their vulnerability to trafficking. Because traffickers offer quick and easy escapes from poverty, children with limited future prosperity, such as those from impoverished families with minimal education, are likely to accept any promise of a better life with little consideration of the risks.

### **3.3.2. Family Situation**

Types of family situations that make a child vulnerable to sex trafficking include (ANITP, 2009c):

- All forms of physical, sexual or verbal abuse experienced or witnessed by a child
- Domestic violence experienced or witnessed by a child
- Family conflict (frequent and/or traumatic fighting or dysfunction)
- Separation or divorce
- Neglect
- Absent parents (such as those working abroad or uninvolved in a child's life)
- Alcoholism and drug addiction

Children surrounded by conflict or violence that are neglected by their families or institutions will seek out alternative forms of support, love, and affection. For recruiters and traffickers, these children are perfect targets. The "lover boy" method of recruiting children in to the sex industry is especially attuned to this

kind of vulnerability. Pimps, recruiters, or traffickers will slowly gain the trust and confidence of children, especially girls, who need and seek out affection to replace an absent healthy family structure. Often times, the recruiter will imitate a loving relationship, acting as a young girl's boyfriend, before convincing her to travel with him abroad, or to work at a friend's restaurant or bar (ANITP, 2009c). Many times, these offers are a façade for sex trafficking.

## **IV. Street Children and Vulnerability to Sexual Exploitation**

### **4.1. The homeless children epidemic in Romania**

In order to understand the realities and risks faced by street children in Romania it is important to first look at the historical context of homelessness and the failures of child protection institutions since the 1980's. The megalomaniacal Ceausescu regime that lasted from 1965 until the revolution in 1989 severely burdened the Romanian familial structure, particularly affecting the welfare of women and children. Anti-abortion and anti-contraceptive policies combined with the state initiative to build a strong labor force by encouraging large families through monetary benefits, coerced families to produce many children (Morrison, 2004). Families and even single women who failed to produce children were required to pay an addition 20% income tax, while women who produced more children received addition benefits for each child (Morrison, 2004). However, the monetary benefits offered by the state were not sufficient enough to cover the costs of raising multiple children, especially considering the lack of adequate social services and the sub-standard health care system. What services did exist in cities were overburdened due to industrialization and the rapid forced relocations that shifted thousands of rural farmers into cramped urban blocks. Furthermore, many people who would have traditionally served as caretakers, such as mothers and grandparents, were now a part of the work force (Morrison, 2004). As a result of these converging factors during the Ceausescu regime, many families could not afford to keep their children and were forced to place them in orphanages (Morrison, 2004). By the late 1980's, more than 100,000 children lived in institutions, enduring horrific conditions (Morrison, 2004).

After the revolution in 1989, state structures fell apart and many orphanages remained underfunded and understaffed. Many children ran away from these institutions, ending up on the street. Oppressive economic conditions under Ceausescu were amplified with the sudden switch to a liberal economy, causing rapid inflation, and high unemployment as dependable state jobs disappeared (Alexandrescu, 2002). Struggling to adjust to the new competitive economy, while still managing large families, many Romanian children were abandoned by their parents or were institutionalized. The affects of Romania's rigid communism

in the 80's and its turbulent transition in the 90's are still visible in the form of the estimated 1,500 (UNICEF, 2006) to 3,000 (MPHASIS, 2008) homeless children in Romania.<sup>4</sup>

Severe poverty, neglect, abuse, and insecure, sporadic social services have caused many children to run away or be abandoned by their families since the fall of communism (Save the Children, 2003; Caritas, personal communication, July 20, 2009). The director of Mia's Children Association says poverty is a driving cause of homeless children because "many [poor children] are forced to abandon school, and then abandon the family" (personal communication, July 21, 2009). Abuse and inadequate living conditions in institutions drive many orphans on the street as well (Save the Children, 2003; Mia's Children, personal communication, July, 21, 2009).

Street children hail from all parts of Romania but typically from poor, rural villages. Attracted by the comparative economic opportunity of cities and larger towns, runaways tend to migrate to urban centers, particularly the capital, Bucharest. During the summer months, Romania's coastal cities see an influx of street children who are drawn to the seasonal tourists and warm weather (Caritas, personal communication, July 20, 2009; ANITP, 2009c). Street children survive in large groups of other children like them, usually ranging in age from 14-18, although some children are much younger (Save the Children, 2003).<sup>5</sup> Although groups of street children are usually comprised of both boys and girls, girls are typically fewer.<sup>6</sup> One theory to explain the gender difference is that girls are more likely to endure poverty and abuse at home or in institutions than face the insecurity and risks of living on the street, especially because of the higher risk of sexual abuse and exploitation for girls. (Save the Children, 2003, Oaza, personal communication, July 28, 2009).

Little scientific research has been conclusive in assessing the sexual exploitation and trafficking of street children in Romania. Studies in other countries show that homelessness is key element to those vulnerable to sex trafficking; one study interviewed 854 trafficked or prostituted women in Canada, Mexico, Colombia,

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<sup>4</sup> Statistics on the number of street children in Romania vary considerably primarily due to the difficulty of counting less visible populations such as street children. Some studies have also used broader definitions of street children that include those children who work on the street but return home at night, accounting for larger estimates. The statistics used in this report are considered the most scientifically reliable, albeit somewhat out of date.

<sup>5</sup> A 2003 study on street children by Save the Children recorded that out of 145 children permanently living on the street, 41% were between the ages of 14-18. The second most frequent age bracket was between 19-23 years (26%).

<sup>6</sup> Out of 106 street children polled, 75 were boys and 31 were girls (Save the Children, 2003).

Germany, South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, the United States, and Zambia, and found that 75% had at one point been homeless (Farley, Cotton, Zumbeck, Spiwak, Reyes, et.al., 2003). Many reports on the welfare of street children in Romania mention the vulnerability of street children to sexual abuse, instances of prostitution, and the inflated rate of sexually transmitted disease, but do not expand upon the specifics of the sexual abuse street children endure. A 1999 national study on homeless children found that 6% of street children said they were sexually abused, while 22% said they had not. The remaining 72% of children who gave no answer suggests that there is a higher rate of sexual exploitation on the street, and that stigma and shame may prevent children from answering honestly (UNICEF, 2006). Documentaries, such as “Children Underground” and particularly the short film aired by CNN, “Cutting Edge: The Child Sex Trade”<sup>7</sup>, have played an important role in exposing the threat of sexual exploitation that Romanian street children face (Belzberg, 2001; Smith, Andrew and Liviu Tipurita, 2003). Other reports mention that that rape of street children in Romania is “very frequent” and girls on the street as “constantly exposed to sexual abuse” (Save the Children, 2005; ECOSOC, 2005).

Despite the lack of extensive scientific inquiry into the vulnerability of street children to sex trafficking, the report published by ANITP in 2009 on the recruitment of children for trafficking and the evidence from this study demonstrate that street children are likely at significant risk to sex trafficking based on their socio-economic status, education level, family situation, experience of abuse and domestic violence, as well as factors that tend to be amplified among street children such material and emotional desperation, drug addiction, lack of family structure, and lack of documentation (ANITP, 2009c).

## **4.2. Factors of Vulnerability**

### **4.2.1. Desperation**

For street children, poverty does not end with running away from the family. Living on the street, these young people immediately find themselves in a precarious and vulnerable circumstance. Without the basic necessities to survive, like food, clothing, water, medical treatment, and shelter, their lives become driven by desperation, making street children susceptible to sexual abuse and exploitation. The director of Mia’s Children cites street children’s desperation for

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<sup>7</sup> “Cutting Edge: The Child Sex Trade” profiled one British sex-tourist, Tom Peters, who traveled to Romania and routinely sex trafficked, abused, and produced pornography Romanian boys on the street. Tom Peters remains at large.

basic needs as a key factor in their vulnerability to sexual exploitation: “I know that these children accept [sexual abuse] for drugs, or meals. Small things can become treasures in their mind, as long as they don’t have almost anything” (Mia’s Children, personal communication, July 21, 2009). Another informant from Oaza in Arad agrees that street children will do anything, including selling themselves, for the smallest “gifts” in return, like a meal, a hot shower, or a new pair of shoes (personal communication, July 28, 2009). Foreigner sex tourists reportedly manipulate street children into having or maintaining abusive sexual relations by showering them with gifts, attention, and promises of international vacations.

Desperation deriving from a lack of education and addiction to drugs perpetuates and escalates the material and emotional desperation that street children experience. Without the opportunity to an education, and therefore employment, street children are forced to sell themselves or tolerate abuse in return for something to eat, or the illusion of genuine affection. Indeed, emotional deprivation is a driving “pull” factor for youth who become trapped in sex trafficking. Children from families or backgrounds lacking healthy affection and love are susceptible to traffickers and recruiters who will, perhaps for the first time in a child’s life, give them affection, praise, and attention though they are used at the same time for sexual abuse and trafficking (Hanna, 2002).

#### **4.2.2. Drugs**

Street children’s vulnerability to sexual abuse is closely linked with the high rate of drug addiction and alcohol abuse. In order to cope with stress, hunger, emotional and physical pain, and as a vehicle to become “a part” of a group, street children frequently turn to drugs and alcohol (Save the Children, 2003; ECOSOC, 2005; Save the Children, 2007).

The industrial paint “Aurolac” is the most common drug used by street children due to its cheap cost that homeless children can afford and the ease in which it can be bought (Save the Children, 2003). Children put the paint into a plastic bag and inhale the fumes, which instantly enter the bloodstream via the lungs, and then into the brain, producing a strong high that lasts a few minutes (Save the Children, 2003). Aurolac can be easily purchased at hardware stores or on the black market that has been created almost exclusively for street children (Save the Children, 2003). Though it is illegal to sell Aurolac to minors, this law is rarely enforced and as of 2003, there has yet to be a criminal case against a vendor selling the paint to minors (Save the Children, 2003). During the 1990’s, street children more commonly used other toxic inhalants, such as “Adela” (an industrial glue) and

Aluminiulac, a.k.a “bronz”, a silver-colored paint. Though more potent, these solvents are less popular because of their higher cost (Save the Children, 2003).

Aurolac and other solvents are highly addictive and cause serious health problems. According to a 2003 Save the Children study on drug addiction among street children, 74% of street children between 11 and 18 years old regularly huffed Aurolac. After coming down from a high, users experience migraines, tiredness, depression, and weakness. To counteract these negative after effects, children inhale greater amounts more often, eventually turning them into addicts (Save the Children, 2003). The consequences of long-term addiction to Aurolac are grave and often irreversible, causing permanent brain lesions that impair cognitive ability, particularly diminishing concentration and memory capacity (Save the Children, 2003). The chances of recovery and rehabilitation for children who have spent years addicted to Aurolac are slim.

Drug addiction is a common element in sex trafficking, both as a mechanism for traffickers and abusers to subdue the victims and as means for victims to escape reality and “cope” with abuse (Vis de Copil, personal communication, July 24, 2009). Conversely, addiction to drugs leads some street children to “accept” sexual abuse or exploitation for money to buy more drugs (Mia’s Children, personal communication, July 21, 2009). Street children suffer tremendous emotional and physical damage as this destructive cycle of self-medication, drug dependency, and sexual abuse evolves into daily life.

Street children between the ages of 14-18 are the most frequent users of alcohol (65% of children). However, the comparatively high price of alcohol prevents many street children from developing alcoholism, many only drinking occasionally.<sup>8</sup> Children between the ages of 11-18 generally drink beer (32%), and 33% of street children aged 14-18 drink hard alcohol (Save the Children, 2003). Cigarette addiction is far more prevalent among street children; 38% of children ten years old and younger smoke, and 80% of all street children smoke at least once a day, 41% of them consuming at least one pack a day, and 38% consuming at least 5-15 cigarettes a day (Save the Children, 2003).

#### **4.2.3. Lack of Family Structure**

The absence of a traditional family structure and perception of the family is an integral part of street children’s vulnerability sexual abuse and exploitation.

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<sup>8</sup> Homeless adults in Romania have a high rate of alcoholism (24% of 19-23 year olds and 73% of 24-30 year olds drinking everyday). This suggests that street children are at high risk of developing alcohol addiction later in life (Save the Children, 2003).

While street children form larger groups of themselves to replace the traditional family model, and though this is an important aspect of street children's lives that is often disregarded and underappreciated particularly in rehabilitation methods,<sup>9</sup> street children's peers cannot fulfill the role of responsible, attentive parents. A representative from AidRom suggests that children, including those living on the street, have a need for "storytelling" and learning life experiences from adults (personal communication, July 22, 2009). Street children lack parental supervision and care and seek these stories and life lessons from other sources, often leading them into the hands of people who exploit them. A representative at AidRom attests that,

...A lack of communication within families makes children organize themselves in a different society, like street groups or gangs. They are trying to build a different hierarchy outside the family because they are not welcome in the family cycle...it is a lack of family perspective. (personal communication, July 22, 2009)

The desire for a "family" and an adult role model makes street children far more vulnerable to entrapment in an abusive relationship. Early education usually derives from parents and other family members, such as learning "right from wrong" and "life lessons." Street children never receive this kind of guidance, limiting their general life knowledge and awareness, and thus making them more vulnerable to unknowingly become entangled in an abusive or exploitative relationship (Vis de Copil, personal communication, July 24, 2009).

The environment that street children are exposed to shapes their life perspective and susceptibility to sexual abuse and exploitation. Often coming from poor neighborhoods that frequently suffer from high rates of alcoholism and family violence, these children are born into a difficult reality (Mia's Children, personal communication, July 21, 2009). Entrenched in such surroundings, coupled with the lack of parental guidance and supervision, the children lack any other life perspective than what they have seen, or see, in their communities. Because the community surrounding street children does not advocate for their protection from sexual abuse and exploitation, and because the community at-large may be

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<sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion on the importance of street children's peers, see Pare, Mona. (2003). Why have all the street children disappeared? The role of international human rights law in protecting vulnerable groups. *International Journal of Children's Rights*, 11, 1-32. Retrieved from <http://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/intjchrb11&div=8&id=&page=>



unaware or unaffected by the sexual abuse and exploitation of street children, it is easy for street children to become sucked into a life of exploitation (Mia's Children, personal communication, July 21, 2009, Petit, 2005).

#### **4.2.4 Identification**

Many street children do not have any identification papers or cards (ECOSOC, 2005). A 1999 study found that 32% of the interviewed street children lacked identity papers, and a later study in 2002 found that 16% of street children lacked birth certificates (UNICEF, 2006). Identification papers, such as birth certificates, may be left with the biological family, or, in many cases, were never made. Street children who lack identification validating their citizenship in Romania are stateless persons, despite *jus soli* eligibility. Their human rights are not only violated by this status but they are at high risk of falling victim to multiple other forms of human rights abuses, including trafficking (United Nations, 1956; Southwick, Lynch, 2009).

The reason for the heightened risk of undocumented street children is two-fold: firstly, children living on the street have no parent, guardian or other supervisor to report sex abuse or trafficking and other street children are unlikely to report abuse due to the distrustful relationship with the police (ANITP, personal communication, July 23, 2009; Mia's Children, personal communication, July 21, 2009). Secondly, without proper identification, street children do not have access to any social or public services including education, health care, and social benefits. This puts them at a far greater disadvantage than the rest of the population and increases their risk to sex trafficking because they are forced to find means of survival through other, riskier methods, including sexual exploitation.

Street children lacking identification are essentially invisible, making them perfect targets for sex traffickers. False identification papers are easily manufactured by traffickers, allowing children to pass through borders without suspicion from border patrol or police. The invisibility of street children and the sexual exploitation they face also makes it difficult for law enforcement to collect statistical data on the prevalence of sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking among street children.

#### **4.2.5. Lack of Education**

A low level of education is a consistent characteristic of street children as well as children who are vulnerable to sex trafficking. Sex trafficking statistics from 2007 show that the majority (59%) of victims had finished between 5-8 years of schooling (ANITP, 2007). Street children rarely attend school, though 80% admit

to attending prior to living on the street (Save the Children, 2003). Studies show that 40% of street children have poor literacy, and at least 16% are illiterate, although this number is likely higher (UNICEF, 2006; Save the Children, 2003).

While street children are routinely criticized as lazy and unmotivated, many children express a desire to go to school and are aware of the importance of education (Alexandrescu, 2002). However, regardless of individual motivation, lack of identification and money for books, school supplies, proper clothing, and transportation make it impossible for homeless children to attend school (Mia's Children, personal communication, July 21, 2009). Without the chance to gain an education, and therefore gainful employment, street children must find alternative methods of survival, including begging, petty theft, and sexual exploitation.

#### **4.2. The Exploiters**

Peers, pimps and traffickers, and foreigners sexually exploit street children (ECOSOC, 2005; Vis de Copil, personal communication, July 24, 2009; Oaza, personal communication, July 28, 2009; Mia's Children, personal communication, July 21, 2009). UN Rapporteur Juan Miguel Petit reported that police also sexually exploit street children (ECOSOC, 2005). While it is unlikely that police are frequently implicated in the sexual abuse of street children, one informant in Arad confirmed Petit's finding, claiming that one of the local police is "known" for exploiting street children (Vis de Copil, personal communication, July 24, 2009). According to some informants, corrupt police also protect trafficking rings from prosecution (Vis de Copil, personal communication, July 24, 2009).

Foreigners and sex tourists that sexually exploit street children originate from developed western countries, especially Italy, United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands and the United States. A former street child reported that many Italians come to Arad for the purpose of sexually exploiting street children. Border towns, like Arad, are throughways for transport trucks coming and going from all over Europe. Truckers generate substantial business for prostitutes, some of whom are trafficked street children or young adults living on the street, a former street child said (Vis de Copil, personal communication, July 21, 2009). Typically street children exploited by foreigners are sex trafficked in Romania and used for pornography and advertized for sex via the Internet (ANITP, personal communication, July 23, 2009; Mia's Children, personal communication, July 21, 2009; SCOP, personal communication, July 23, 2009). Online pedophile networks communicate the availability of children for sex in Romania, exchange pornographic materials and even help to traffic children from Romania into western nations (ANITP, personal communication, July 23, 2009; Mia's Children, personal communication, July 21, 2009).

National statistics report that sex tourism is low, and some informants maintained that it was not a “problem” in Romania, though they did not deny that it happens (ANITP, personal communication, July 23, 2009; AidRom, personal communication, July 22, 2009). A spokesperson from AidRom said that there are only “isolated cases” of sex tourism in Romania and that pedophiles from western nations had “imagined that Romania could become a paradise for sex tourism, but...their dream did not come true...because in Romania, there are still communities with values, with decency” (personal communication, July 22, 2009). Other NGOs, like Vis de Copil and Mia’s Children, say that it still happens enough to be considered an issue. A representative at Mia’s Children explained, “I saw with my very own eyes children being abused by people coming from abroad. And I was shocked” (personal communication, July 21, 2009).

Surviving on the street in groups of other homeless children, street children are highly vulnerable to sexual exploitation among their peer group. Within a group of street children, strong hierarchies are often enforced through violence and abuse. As some NGOs explained, street children prove their strength and superiority by physically and sexually abusing others (Vis de Copil, personal communication, July 24, 2009; Oaza, personal communication, July 28, 2009; Mia’s Children, personal communication, July 21, 2009). A spokesperson from Mia’s Children said that,

...[the street children] have a kind of organization, a hierarchy, of positions, and the necessity to prove that you are the strongest. If you want a favor from someone in a higher position, you have to give them something. What can [street children] give? Mostly themselves. (personal communication, July 21, 2009)

Sexual abuse between peers is not only an issue for children living on the street, but also for children living in children’s homes or orphanages (which include former street children). An informant reported incidents where older children in homes or orphanages abused the younger children as a mechanism to enforce their superior position. The informant disclosed that this is especially the case for children who have experienced sexual abuse themselves, either in their homes or on the street (Mia’s Children, personal communication, July 21, 2009). Indeed, many children on the street were formerly in institutions and ran away because of abuse.

Some children fall into the hands of pimps who prostitute them on the street, although prostituted minors are typically coerced into trafficking before ever reaching the street. The director of Mia’s Children shared the case of one child at the home:

This child...his mom is one of the children who are used for sex and drugs. She is 23 years old...she is mentally retarded. She was taken by a gang for prostitution...she is very beautiful but she cannot make decisions because she is mentally retarded. They use her. They drug her, and she is a prostitute. She gave birth to this child when she was 15 years old. (Personal communication, July 21, 2009)

#### 4.5. The Roma

Roma communities in Romania consistently suffer from high rates of poverty; poor housing conditions with little access to running water, electricity, sewerage, and heating; poor overall health coupled with limited access to health services; and limited access to quality education.<sup>10</sup> Permeating all realms of Romanian society, deeply rooted racism and stereotypes against the Roma severely affect the Roma community's ability to overcome their marginalized social status. Discrimination on the basis of ethnicity and gender are frequent occurrences that prevent or discourage Roma women and girls from attending school, finding gainful employment, and integrating into society. The discrimination that Roma women and girls experience based on their gender and ethnicity coupled with the negative effects that lack of proper education, housing, employment, and access to social services create, potentially make Roma women and girls a target group of traffickers (Ravnbol, 2009). The disadvantaged socio-economic status of the Roma also accounts for the disproportionate number of Roma children who live on the street (Vis de Copil, personal communication, July, 24, 2009).

A representative from Mia's Children says racism toward Roma is relevant to the issue of street children: "There is a lot of discrimination yet. As long as the discrimination is so intense, you cannot expect anything to change" (personal communication, July 21, 2009). Like all street children, homeless Roma children are vulnerable to sex trafficking and exploitation. Though some NGOs and

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<sup>10</sup> For more information on the socio-economic status of the Roma in Romania, see European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC). (2001). *State of impunity: Human rights abuse of Roma in Romania*. Retrieved from [http://www.errc.org/Countryrep\\_index.php](http://www.errc.org/Countryrep_index.php); Hoelscher, Petra. (2007). *Romani children in South East Europe: The challenge of overcoming centuries of distrust and discrimination*. UNICEF. Retrieved from [http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/media\\_1231.html](http://www.unicef.org/ceecis/media_1231.html); Open Society Institute. (2006). *Broadening the agenda: The status of Romani women in Romania*. Retrieved from [http://www.soros.org/initiatives/roma/articles\\_publications/publications/broadening\\_20060313](http://www.soros.org/initiatives/roma/articles_publications/publications/broadening_20060313); Open Society Institute. (2007). *Equal access to quality education for Roma*. Retrieved from [http://www.soros.org/initiatives/roma/articles\\_publications/publications/equal\\_20070329](http://www.soros.org/initiatives/roma/articles_publications/publications/equal_20070329); Save the Children. (2006). *Copiii Rromi: Raport de cercetare*. Retrieved from [http://www.salvaticopiii.ro/romania/ce\\_facem/programe/protectia\\_copiilor\\_rromi.html](http://www.salvaticopiii.ro/romania/ce_facem/programe/protectia_copiilor_rromi.html)

government agencies, like ANITP, say that Roma street children are not favorable to pimps or clients because they are “dirty” and “unclean” and are therefore unfit for prostitution, the precarious socio-economic situation of Roma street children suggests that they are among the most vulnerable groups to sexual exploitation and abuse. (ANITP, personal communication, July 23, 2009). It is critical to further explore the ethnic dimension of street children and sex trafficking victims as a whole in order to fully understand the social context of the sexual abuse of homeless children.

#### **4.6. Relationship with Police**

Without trusted adults like parents to advocate for them, the abuse and harm that street children endure often goes undetected and untreated. Street children therefore rely on NGOs, social workers, and the police to protect them. However, the relationship between police and street children is often turbulent. Some police are strong advocates for street children, while there are still instances, though rare, of police physically and sexually abusing street children. Vis de Copil reported one police officer in Arad who is “known” for sexually abusing street children (personal communication, July 24, 2009). Romanian police have also been implicated in protecting and shielding trafficking and prostitution rings from legal prosecution in exchange for a cut of the profits (Vis de Copil, personal communication, July 24, 2009; Mia’s Children, personal communication, July 21, 2009). A representative from Mia’s Children spoke about police corruption and abuse saying that,

I’m sure there is a lot of corruption, I’m sure. I’m sure because you can hear children tell you how they were used...how they were used even by police or with the acceptance of police. They will tell you, ‘they knew that there were men coming to do something wrong to me.’ (personal communication, July 21, 2009).

Beyond sexual abuse, street children face discrimination and physical abuse from police as well. NGOs, like Oaza, Mia’s Children, and Vis de Copil, said that police, and in particular the community police, beat up street children (personal communication, July 2009). Intimidation and unlawful use of power, such as pocketing street children’s money under the unwarranted presumption that it is stolen cash, have created a tense and distrustful relationship between police and street children. One NGO reported an incident where street children sitting in a train station were ordered to leave because they were not carrying tickets. Other people in the station were also ticketless, but were not told to leave. The NGO called this unfair and discriminatory, and claimed that street children receive this kind of treatment no matter where they go (Vis de Copil, personal

communication, July 24, 2009). ANITP reported that street children are also afraid of the police because they are aware that many of their activities are illegal (i.e. stealing, loitering), and believe that the police will arrest them if they seek help (personal communication, July 23, 2009).

Despite the rocky relationship between authorities and street children, there are police who do genuinely want to help. A spokesperson at AidRom shared a story about a group of police officers in Bucharest who started their own unofficial program handing out food to street children in Gara de Nord (North Station), a Bucharest landmark notorious for homeless children (personal communication, July 22, 2009). Despite what good intentions some police in Romania may have, they are ill equipped to deal with street children single handedly. Often understaffed and struggling to attend to all sectors of law enforcement, police are overwhelmed, leaving street children ignored (Mia's Children, personal communication, July 21, 2009). "I think they should have a separate department for the problem [of street children]. The police here in Romania have to do everything everywhere and it is difficult", explained a representative from Mia's Children (personal communication, July 21, 2009).

The police lack personnel, time, and most importantly, training, to attend to the issue of street children. Homeless children are labeled and stigmatized by the public as pick pockets, thieves, and delinquents, allowing resentment to form between law enforcement and street children. Some NGOs call for better-trained and informed police and social workers to properly deal with the issue of street children, including training on the circumstances and psychology of a child who has lived on the street (Mia's Children, personal communication, July 21, 2009; Oaza, personal communication, July 28, 2009). Regardless of what positive efforts police are making to help youth living on the street, these children have little faith or trust that the police will help or advocate for them. This makes the job of uncovering and addressing the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse even more complex.

## **V. Effects & Recovery**

Street children who have been sexually abused or exploited suffer from severe physical and psychological damage. Street children often arrive at care centers and children's homes showing signs of severe neglect. They are very dirty with multiple variations of skin diseases and funguses (one boy was described as having a leprosy-like affliction that rotted away his skin), malnutrition, fleas, lice, anemia, hepatitis, and Tuberculosis (Mia's Children, personal communication, July 21, 2009). Children who have become addicted to Aurolac may also have brain damage (Oaza, personal communication, July 28, 2009). In addition to these

health concerns, children who have been sexually abused or exploited suffer from sexually transmitted diseases, particularly syphilis (Oaza, personal communication, July 28, 2009; SCOP, personal communication, July 23, 2009; Save the Children, 2003). Question remains to the prevalence of HIV/AIDS among street children and youth – contracted sexually or through drug use – as the majority of children are not tested (SCOP, personal communication, July 23, 2009). However extreme, these physical afflictions pale in comparison to the psychological affects that sexually abused and exploited street children experience.

Street children who have been sexually abused suffer from severe psychological trauma that takes years to begin to heal. The learned distrust and fear of adults that street children develop compounds the rehabilitative process. When they are offered food, shelter, or clothing from an NGO or government institution, street children automatically expect that the person desires something from them. Altruistic kindness is foreign to street children, and they have grown accustomed to a system where they must always give something to receive anything (Mia's Children, personal communication, July 21, 2009). The trauma from having experienced sexual abuse is merely piled onto the other forms of psychological abuse and neglect that street children have suffered. Some children on the street were abandoned or neglected by their parents, adding to their distrust of adult figures. A representative from Mia's Children gave reference to the trauma experienced in one case she had, saying, "You can imagine how destroyed they were inside...to be abandoned, left in a field in a cardboard box, to be abused." For those street children that don't make it off the street, painful memories are drowned in drug addiction and sexual abuse becomes internalized as a normal part of existence. "They don't even consider themselves victims...they have nothing to look forward to," said one former street child (Vis de Copil, personal communication, July 24, 2009).

In the past ten years, many initiatives to aid street children have helped to reduce the number of minors living on the street. Many of the children that would have likely ended up on the street are now in children's homes and care centers. Some street children have been rehabilitated, but the process is "discouraging" for many organizations (ANITP, personal communication, July 23, 2009). Though the numbers have reduced, the same problems remain for those children living on the street and for those children who are struggling to recuperate. Though several rehabilitative and care centers exist in Romania, they are not necessarily prepared or equipped to work with street children, especially those with psychological trauma as a result of sexual exploitation and abuse.

A representative from AidRom said that street children's basic needs, such as food, clothing, and shelter, are being met by the programs at children's homes, but other needs such as "self-esteem", "self-accomplishment" and "personal development," are often neglected (personal communication, July 22, 2009). Other informants agreed that more psychological support and resources must be made available to victims for a comprehensive and successful recovery (Mia's Children, personal communication, July 21, 2009). In order to remedy the issue of street children's vulnerability to sexual exploitation, the director of Mia's Children suggests that the Romanian government "make an office where [psychologists] ...even listen to these children speaking...just listen, and take notes, and hopefully the psychologist would try to understand and discover many of the roots [of sexual abuse and exploitation]" (personal communication, July 21, 2009). A spokesperson at Oaza also reported the need for staff and psychologists working with street children to be trained how to work with them, to create a relationship of understanding and allow for modifications and flexibility in rehabilitative methodologies to better serve and heal the children (personal communication, July 28, 2009).

Several NGOs and government initiatives have been set up to address the issues of street children and the sexual exploitation of children. However, there are no shelters or programs specifically for child victims of trafficking, and as Special Rapporteur Petit remarks, programs directed toward the sexual exploitation of street children are "virtually absent" (ECOSOC, 2005). Many abused, sexually exploited and trafficked children are referred to the same shelters, making it impossible for staff and clinicians to target the specific needs of every child. Other shelters in and around Bucharest serving trafficking victims and street children include a shelter run by the International Organization for Migration in conjunction with a partner NGO, Reaching Out safe house for girl and women victims of sex trafficking in Pitesti (ECOSOC, 2005). Organizations and safe houses serving street children in Arad and Timisoara include Oaza, Caritas Timisoara, Vis de Copil, Asociatia Mana, Society for Children and Parents (SCOP) and Directia Generala de Asistentă Socială și Protecția Copilului (DGASPC).

Some NGOs cited the dramatic decline in international funding in the past few years an obstacle to fully serving street children. Oaza has been forced to shut down two shelters for homeless and abandoned children as outside funding from organizations and charities in Western Europe and North America has dwindled (personal communication, July 28, 2009). Vis de Copil has temporarily closed its shelter due to a lack of volunteers and zero funding for paid employment (personal communication, July 24, 2009). Organizations that previously depended on international funds to support rehabilitative programs for street children, are



now forced to rely on small donations to continue running, making it impossible for their programs to effectively function. Since Romania entered the European Union in 2007, new European regulations for children's homes and shelters, such as the number of children allowed per bathroom and room size, are huge financial burdens for organizations that must renovate children's homes and invest more money and space into new structures (Oaza, personal communication, July 28, 2009). Coupled with limited outside funding, many projects to help street children have been stalled for years or abandoned all together.

Beyond financial struggles, the task of rehabilitating street children and youth is monumentally challenging in and of itself. Children who have spent a considerable amount of time on the street become accustomed to living without regulation, schedule, rules, or limits. Many street children in residential social programs have difficulty transitioning from the freedom of living on the street to the more structured, limits-oriented schedule of the centers. Reintegration of street children is also challenging because most children have been absent from school for most of their lives. The children often feel uncomfortable being enrolled in classes with students much younger than themselves (Save the Children, 2007).

Adjusting to a "normal" life in a children's home or orphanage proves very difficult for many street children. In fact, many children will initially run away from a center after only a few days or weeks. The director of Mia's Children explained that, "It's a different psychology for these children. They don't like to obey; they don't like to accept rules. They like to be themselves, a sense that they can do anything they want" (personal communication, July 21, 2009). The key to working with street children, as many experienced informants said, is trying to understand and relate to the children, and allowing them to choose their own futures. A representative at AidRom explained:

The directors of NGOs, whenever they come to the position they first of all try to regulate – the time, program, everything. But with street children, it doesn't work that easily – not with normal people! If you want to make a rehabilitation program for street children, you first have to adopt the style, then slowly, step by step pull them from their style to your style. (personal communication, July 22, 2009)

The director of Mia's Children shared the same sentiment:

You have to explain why you are asking them to do this...you cannot be like, 'you can't do this, you can't do that,' because what they do in their life is normal to them, what we do is abnormal. It is a transfer; you can't just do it magically. Its not easy but it is not impossible. (personal communication, July 21, 2009)

Street children need to comprehend the changes in their lives once they enter a rehabilitative program, and by allowing them to make active decisions about their lives, the children get the freedom they need to be motivated in rehabilitative programs.

Many NGOs advocate for a flexible relationship between rehabilitative centers and children coming from the street, but many also stress the importance of addressing the issue of street children from its foundations, not solely investing time and effort into the rehabilitation of victims. The director of Mia's Children explained that,

The children coming from the streets are just a reflection of a society that doesn't pay attention to the roots" and that "as long as we don't find the roots [of street children], don't resolve the roots, we will have the same difficulties. (personal communication, July 21, 2009)

Underlying social problems, like poverty, discrimination, and lack of education, are catalysts for the more visible phenomenon of street children in Romania. Until these issues have been aggressively dealt with, street children will remain, and they will continue to be vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation.

## **VI. Conclusions**

The findings of this research show that material and emotional desperation, drug addiction, lack of family structure, lack of identification, and lack of education are the leading factors of vulnerability to sexual abuse and trafficking among homeless children. Street children who have been abused have access to limited social services and/or rehabilitation options. Many services do not meet the specific needs of street children and may not offer complete services (such as mental health services, or alternative education programs), which may stunt or prevent recovery for some children. Global and national financial woes, as well as new European Union regulations for shelters, have strained many NGOs and state-funded programs, preventing adequate care for street children.

The tense relationship between street children, and the public and police is an obstacle that prevents the protection of street children from sexual abuse and exploitation. Specialized training on homelessness and sexual abuse is required for police forces as well as service providers so that street children can be better represented, understood, and protected. Though small in numbers, street children in Romania are hyper-vulnerable to sexual exploitation, and the Romanian government, as well as the European community must recognize this issue and devise a course of action to prevent the victimization of homeless children in Romania.

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